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**FACULTY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

**BARTLETT SCHOOL OF PLANNING**

**Deficiencies in Urban Design Policy for Suburban Town  
Centres in London: Is Strategic Design the Answer?**

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Being a Report submitted to the faculty of The Built Environment as part of the requirements for the award of the MSc Town Planning at University College London: I declare that this Report is entirely my own work and that ideas, data and images, as well as direct quotations, drawn from elsewhere are identified and referenced.

**Jesse Honey**

**24 August 2006**

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## **List of Contents**

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Context.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3. Case Study Methodology.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>4. Case Studies.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4a. Ilford.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4b. Bromley.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4c. Mitcham.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>5. Analysis.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>6. Recommendations.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Wordcounts.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>8. References.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Edited transcript of Ilford interview.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Edited transcript of Bromley interview.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Edited transcript of Mitcham interview.....</b>	<b>76</b>



## **List of Figures**

<b>Figure 1: Suburban ‘placelessness’ in London.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 2: The status of AAPs and SPDs within the new planning regime.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Figure 3: The Birmingham City Centre Strategy.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Figure 4: An example of current strategic design guidance in London.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Figure 5: Location of Case Study Areas in London.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Figures 6-9: Illustrations accompanying the Ilford Town Centre Area Action Plan.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Figures 10 and 11: Illustrations accompanying Bromley AAP documentation.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Figures 12-15: Local distinctiveness in and around Mitcham.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Figure 16: Typical ‘edge city’ development in Houston, USA.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Figure 17: The Croydon Tramlink.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Figure 18: Macro-scale urban design in Portland, USA.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Figure 19: An illustration from the ‘Clone Town Britain’ report.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Figure 20: A town in one of Ebenezer Howard’s ‘town clusters’.....</b>	<b>47</b>

## **Abstract**

Awareness is increasing among planners and designers that the previously neglected suburbs may have an important role to play in enhancing the overall sustainability of the city-region. Urban design, applied with the aim of enhancing a sense of place, may also be particularly important in the traditionally 'placeless' suburban context.

Following the 2004 Planning and Compensation Act, urban design frameworks began to emerge for suburban town centres in London. They are important and demand analysis, because they represent modern urban design in London moving beyond the city core into mixed-use suburban areas. Any analysis of this phenomenon must also include awareness of the implications of the London Plan, setting as it does the strategic planning context for all suburban design frameworks.

Three differing case study design frameworks were selected for detailed investigation. In most cases, micro-scale design objectives within the study area were well-formulated. However, issues relating to their wider context often appeared problematic, notably the frameworks' relationship with neighbouring centres, enhancement of local distinctiveness, and their attitude towards environmental sustainability.

With the relatively monocentric London Plan ignoring the important potential contribution of London's suburbs to city-region growth and sustainability, the regional planning context thus generated encourages the parochiality highlighted within the case study design frameworks. A realignment of regional policy, particularly the formulation of strategic design goals, might offer suburban town centres more opportunity to contribute to London's growth and sustainability. According to case study evidence, such realignment should incorporate promotion of orbital public transport corridors, co-ordination of complementary or 'niche' roles for town centres enhancing any existing local sense of place, and top-down integration of environmental sustainability from regional to local level. This new strategic planning and design context might represent an achievable first stage towards a more sustainable, polycentric pattern of development for London.

## 1. Introduction

*'The suburbs are the forgotten dimension of urban policy. Even though suburban areas are home to 86% of England's population, they are still missing from the debate on the urban renaissance'* (LGA et al, 2002:1).

*'Sustainable city planning must come to terms with the vast suburbia enveloping most towns and cities that will survive for many decades'* (Moughtin and Shirley, 2005:222).

*'The genius of London is in its suburbs. And that is the conclusion we need to draw in forging our twenty-first century urban renaissance'* (Hall, 2001:113).

The comments above reflect the increasing attention focussed in recent years on the strategic planning and design of suburban areas, particularly in terms of their existing and potential contribution to sustainable development (URBED, 2002:iii). Realisation has grown that, far from the homogenous residential communities that they were always assumed to be, suburbs vary by function, morphology and location (Harris and Larkham, 1999:1-5) and that the city-suburb relationship is far more complex than the traditional view of 'the city and the suburb as separate entities; an urban centre of tall buildings and a surrounding ring of leafy communities' (Barnett, 1974:116). Recently, suburban instances of socioeconomic polarisation previously associated only with the inner city (Dunsford, 2002:82), as well as an increasing emphasis on the environmental sustainability of all parts of the city-region structure (Thurstain-Goodwin and Batty, 2001:253), have spurred theories of how suburban areas could or should be sustainably planned and designed (URBED, 2002:9).

The traditional and continuing accusations of 'placelessness' levelled at suburbia (Relph, 1976:105; Arefi, 1999), mean that the role that urban design can play in transforming 'spaces' devoid of meaning into imageable, legible 'places' (Roberts, 1998:89) may be particularly valuable in the suburban areas of the city-region (Lynch, 1960:115).



**Figure 1: Suburban ‘placelessness’ in London.** This picture could have been taken almost anywhere in the outer suburbs.

Furthermore, the often imprecise division between urban design and planning, which tends to blur increasingly at larger scales of design intervention, necessitates a broad definition of and approach to urban design (Lynch, 1981:290; Rowley, 1994:186) that will be used throughout this report. Although attempting to formulate definitions of urban design and its relationship with town planning is beyond the remit of the current study, even cursory analysis of the issues at the heart of the urban design renaissance of the 1990s reveals that urban design long ago moved ‘beyond aesthetics and basic amenity considerations to include a concern for environmental quality encompassing.....economic, social and environmental sustainability’ (Carmona et al, 2003:239). For many commentators, the next frontier in urban design theory and practice is the embedding of environmental sustainability into design at all levels (Guise et al, 1994:222; Cowan, 2002:48). This may include an important role for macro-level design, particularly given

that ‘one of the major strategic factors determining environmental sustainability is urban form, i.e. the nature and shape of settlement patterns within and between cities’ (Breheny, 1993:71).

This report will firstly investigate the existing application of urban design in suburban town centres at the local scale. It will progress secondly to the potential application of strategic macro-design theory across suburban town centres, generated in response to the deficiencies uncovered in the existing context.

In pursuit of the first goal, it will seek to relate current issues in urban design theory to practice within suburban London. As we have seen, environmental sustainability and the creation or enhancement of place are considered relevant in the suburban context; therefore, an emphasis on environmental sustainability will be matched by analysis of design’s application in tackling suburban placelessness, with both dimensions explored theoretically as well as practically through case study analysis. In pursuit of the report’s second goal, evidence-based recommendations will be combined within a framework of macro-design intervention that may offer enhanced opportunities to promote sustainability and placemaking compared with the status quo.

The structure of the paper has been organised deliberately along the traditional methodology of ‘survey-analysis-plan’ for investigating, analysing and prescribing urban problems and solutions dating back to the work of Patrick Geddes (1914). The chapters headed ‘Context’, ‘Analysis’ and ‘Recommendations’ correspond to these three stages, with case studies considered as an intrinsic component of the ‘Context’ stage, preparing the ground for later analysis. The Recommendations and final Conclusion chapters aim to reconcile research findings with potential future development directions.

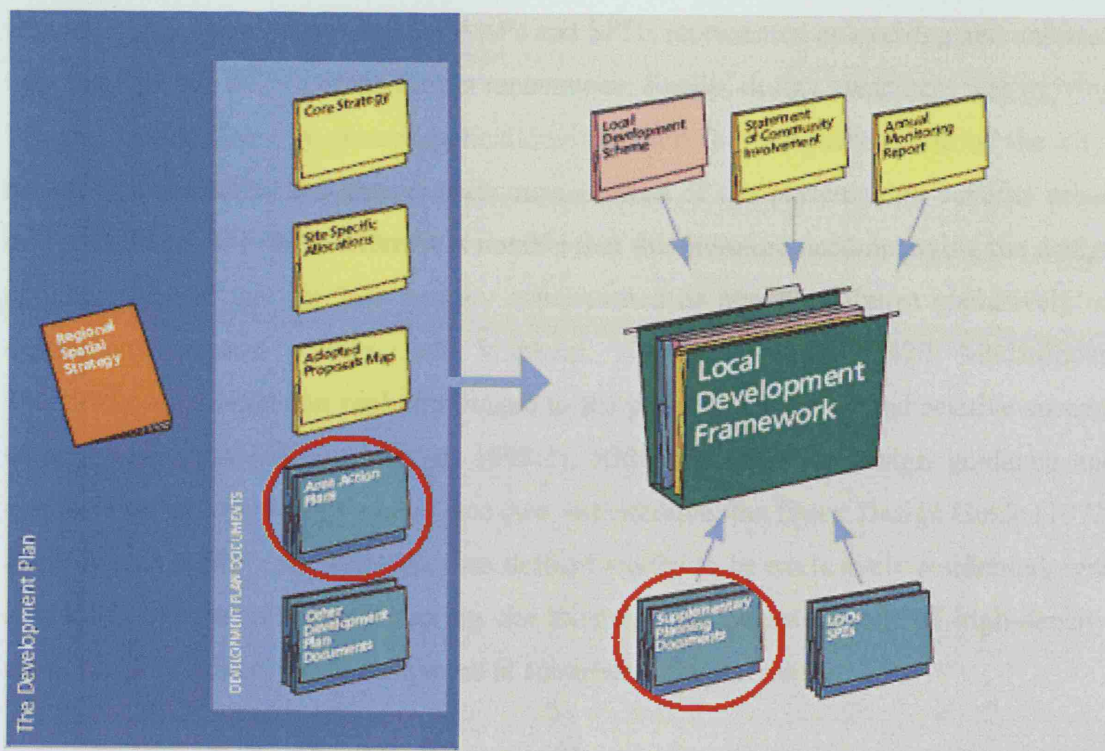
## **2. Context**

The Planning and Compensation Act (HM Government, 2004) aimed to create a context for the practice of spatial planning throughout England and Wales. This new integrative role for planning at both regional and local levels was intended to facilitate a more proactive, positive approach that would result in sustainable development, contrasting with the reactive, developer-led approach that the Government felt often compromised the previous system of land-use planning. The new approach also offered obvious opportunities for initiative and innovation in the theory and practice of urban design (Carmona, 2004; CABE, 2005).

The new planning regime encouraged local authorities to prepare, where relevant, Area Action Plans (AAPs) and Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs). The government's PPS12 document explains that AAPs should 'provide the planning framework for areas where significant change or conservation is needed. [They] should deliver planned growth areas; stimulate regeneration;.....resolve conflicting objectives in areas subject to development pressures; or focus the delivery of area-based regeneration initiatives'. (ODPM, 2004a:9). The Companion Guide to PPS12 elaborates further: 'Area action plans should focus upon implementation, providing an important mechanism for ensuring development of an appropriate scale, mix and quality for key areas of opportunity, change or conservation' (ODPM, 2004b:20).

PPS12 also defines SPDs, which in practice share many of the regeneration objectives of AAPs but are less interventionist; unlike AAPs they do not enjoy development plan status and may not be used to allocate land. However, they may be produced speedily in response to sudden change and remain useful in guiding design intervention, as they 'can demonstrate through illustrations, text and practical examples how policies can be taken forward. SPDs can include design guides [and] site development briefs'. (ODPM, 2004b:23).





**Figure 2: The status of AAPs and SPDs within the new planning regime (ODPM, 2004b:18).** AAPs form development plan documents, whereas SPDs do not. Despite this difference in legal status, they can both be used to promote design frameworks.

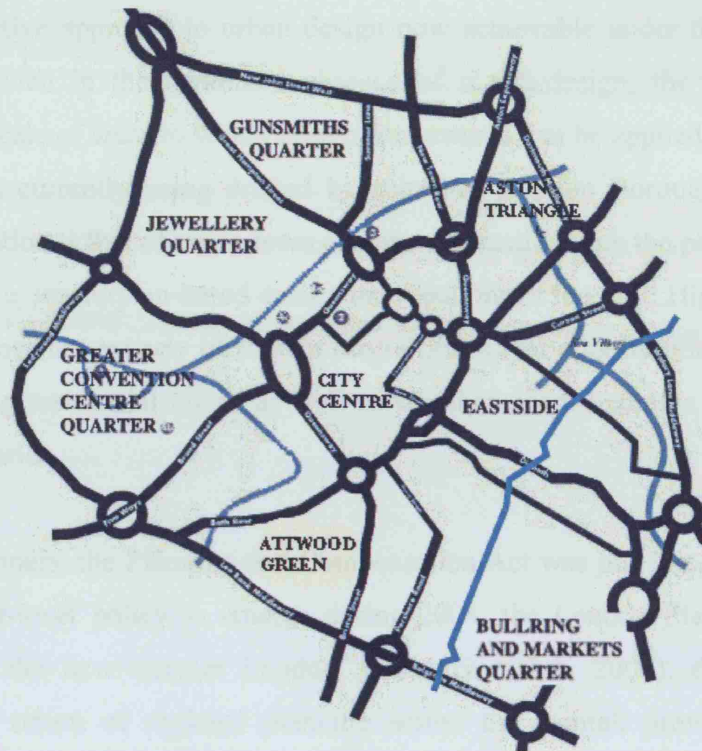
From 2005 onwards, AAPs and SPDs began to emerge in draft form covering suburban town centres in the outer Boroughs of London. The importance of these documents was considerable; for the first time in outer London, urban design was being promoted as a practical rather than theoretical solution that could deliver economic, social and environmental benefit while simultaneously creating a sense of place. Such a leap in ambition was driven by a variety of factors, fully explored in the case study chapter below; however, in general terms, it appears that many suburban Boroughs have come to realise that ‘despite the emphasis in the urban design literature on small-scale, incremental change, there are occasional needs for ‘big bang’ developments of sufficient size and scale to change fundamentally the nature and economy of a place in ways that could never happen incrementally. Such developments also have the potential to address issues of place-making in a coherent and joined-up manner’ Carmona et al (2003:207).

Crucially, there was a sense that the AAPs and SPDs represented an exciting and untested new stage for the British urban design renaissance; finally, design awareness was moving beyond the familiar city-centre applications and into the peripheral parts of the city-region that, arguably, had always been most in need of the placemaking benefits urban design had been proven to offer. It is notable that the literature accompanying the design enlightenment of the late 20th century concentrated its attention almost exclusively on central city contexts (Gosling and Maitland, 1984:96; Hall, 2002:420; Madanipour, 1996:105), a phenomenon probably linked to the perceived stability and relative success of suburban areas (Gwilliam et al, 1998:2). Although suburban design guidance and commentary has existed for a long time (see, for example, the Essex Design Guide [1973] and Edwards [1981]), the suburbia thus defined tended to be exclusively residential, with academics and practitioners ignoring the existing and potential role of high-density, commercial or mixed-use development at suburban transport nodes.

However, times have changed. A brief glance at many of the new AAP and SPD documents shows that local authorities not previously noted for cutting-edge design (and in many cases, that had been responsible for some of the worst examples of suburban design in London up to and including the 1980s) had taken on board the theoretical literature culminating in awareness and promotion of urban design at government level from the mid-1990s onwards. The value of the new documents lay in their practical, workable approach, with extensive local appraisal feeding into an objective, robust basis for design frameworks based on high density, mixed use development. The sketches, maps and three-dimensional plans accompanying the text brought to life the tantalising and almost unbelievable prospect of a far-reaching reappraisal of London's existing drab, unloved suburbia, mocked for decades by planners, designers and the general public at large. With the pursuit of sustainable development constituting the ideological driver behind the 2004 Act, planning documents generated under the new regime also offered an ideal opportunity to integrate sustainability, previously a stranger to many suburban contexts, into urban design.



For a long period in Britain, urban design had tended to be confined to the site-specific or 'micro-scale', with Punter and Carmona (1997:352) expressing frustration that '[design's] role in shaping overall urban form and the pattern of urban development has been ignored'. Likewise, Frey (1999:22) complains that 'little is said, discussed and published about urban design at the city district level and not much at all concerning the city and city-region level'. However, some local authorities that had invested early in design were able to demonstrate its successful practical application on a large spatial scale. An example of such strategic 'macro-design' was the City Centre Strategy for Birmingham (1990) formulated by Tibbalds et al, in which an overarching urban design framework generated detailed design objectives at local level for individual 'character areas' across the city centre. The strategic framework linked these city quarters together in a new pedestrian movement network, which saw large portions of the inner ring road either sunken to allow pedestrian bridging or removed altogether (Carmona, 2001:176); the Strategy's success later spurred Birmingham to extend urban design to the even larger scale of the city-region (Birmingham City Council, 2003). Macro-design of this type is the largest component of Carmona et al's (2003:239) 'integrated hierarchy of design guidance extending from the strategic district scale to area-specific guidance for large-scale...development projects' (such as suburban centre AAPs and SPDs).



**Figure 3: The Birmingham City Centre Strategy (Birmingham City Council, 2006), showing the macro-level water and road-based movement network (or ‘capital web’) linking and co-ordinating the micro-scale design of the named individual city quarters.**

As in Birmingham, the practical application of macro-design is most frequently presented in terms of sustainable transport and movement networks between city districts (Greed, 1998:197) that can form a basis for the ‘capital web’; this is defined as ‘the movement network, the services buried beneath it and the public buildings and parks along and within it’ (Buchanan, 1988:33). Furthermore, ‘it is the capital web that structures a city, its land uses and land values, the density of developments and the intensity of their use, and the way the citizens move through, see and remember the city’ (ibid). A transport-oriented capital web based on orbital movement may be particularly important in suburban areas as residential densities increase (Simmonds, 1993:97) because research shows that orbital travel from suburb to suburb has now extensively displaced the traditional radial patterns between suburb and centre (Webster et al, 1985).

The more proactive approach to urban design now achievable under the new planning system offers, even in the continued absence of macro-design, the potential for an increase in the scale of areas to which design frameworks can be applied. In the AAP and SPD documents currently being drafted by suburban London Boroughs, the favoured level of intervention is that of entire town centres, contrasting with the physically smaller, more prescriptive, masterplan-based design interventions of the past. High-quality design intervention across the entirety of a town centre offers real opportunities to reconnect it with surrounding residential areas, as well as to other nearby centres within or across Borough boundaries.

For London planners, the Planning and Compensation Act was just one of two important pieces of higher-level policy to emerge during 2004; the London Plan was the other. Formulated by the new Greater London Authority (GLA, 2004), the London Plan represented the return of regional planning across the capital, providing a strategic framework of spatial planning policies with which the planning objectives of the 32 Boroughs must be 'in general conformity' (ibid:vii). Immediately below London Plan level, the GLA (2005a, b, c, d and e) also created five draft sub-regional development frameworks (SRDFs) divided geographically into Central, East, South, West and North London. The SRDFs are intended as 'bridges' between London Plan and Borough plan and spell out in more detail the development expected of each Borough by outlining the precise locations and type of growth envisaged for each subregion.

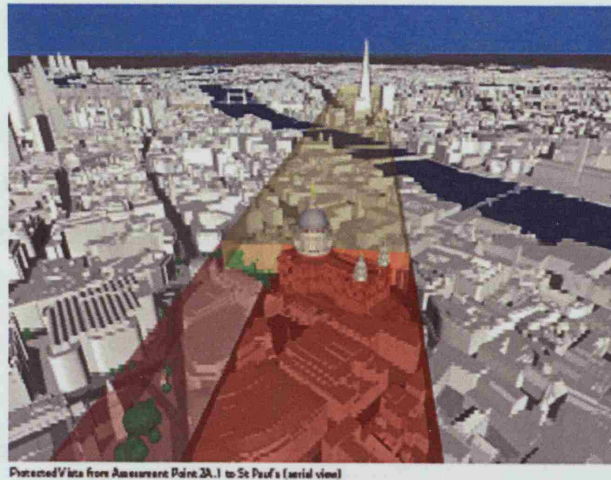
One of the London Plan's central aims was that of maintaining the status of London as a 'world city' and ensuring its continued competitiveness on a global stage (GLA, 2004:4). This was driven by a perception that London had slipped behind economically during its planless years, as well as by the opportunities for developmental growth presented by the extensive brownfield sites extending from central London east along the River Thames that formed the London component of the Thames Gateway growth area promoted by central government (ibid:18). The Plan's projection of extensive population migration to London further justified its growth agenda; it envisaged 336,000 new households (ibid:54) and 636,000 new jobs (ibid:88) over the Plan period to 2016. Although the Plan

attempted to spread much of the envisaged new housing across suburban London by setting strict annual housing targets for every Borough (ibid:55), the location of employment followed a less interventionalist, more market-friendly strategy, with the majority of new job creation within the central and inner eastern areas (ibid:18; Edwards, 2006:3).

The London Plan's transport strategy matched this relatively monocentric employment distribution, seeking to channel major investment into the existing radial structure of London's transport network, from homes in the suburbs to jobs at the centre. In the interests of sustainability, higher-density, mixed-use development was promoted at areas of high public transport accessibility throughout the London area (ibid:59).

The Plan incorporated a healthy number of other aspects of environmental sustainability, seeking, for example, to encourage combined heat and power (CHP) schemes for all major development and aiming to ensure that new development made use of renewable energy and natural systems, through such measures as passive solar gain, wind turbines, solar panels and sustainable urban drainage systems (ibid:180).

The London Plan's urban design strategy offered little more than a general re-statement of existing national-level guidance found in PPS1 (ODPM, 2005a) albeit with a number of London-specific policies on tall and large buildings, focussed mainly on central London (GLA, 2004:173). The Plan and its associated SRDFs offered no application of macro-design strategy for the city as a whole, with any strategic role for the Mayor's new 'Design for London' unit (GLA, 2006b) as yet unknown and unlikely. Although it is true that the London Plan seeks intensification of development at public transport nodes, intensive infill and backlands development in residential areas away from suburban centres as described by Williams et al (1996:86) continues to be permitted by many Boroughs, driven in many cases by the contribution it can make towards the Plan's stringent housing targets.



Protected View from Assessment Point 2A.1 to St Paul's (aerial view)

**Figure 4: An example of current strategic design guidance in London.** This protected viewing corridor around St Paul's is typical of the limited consideration of design at the macro-level, which is largely based around policy on tall buildings in central London. This issue was considered important enough for supplementary planning guidance to be issued (GLA, 2005f:41).

The monocentricity of the London Plan's employment distribution caused alarm among many suburban Boroughs (Maguire et al, 2004:34), and in some cases was a driver for the creation of their AAPs or SPDs, formulated with the aim of ensuring that the area stood to benefit economically to the greatest possible extent within the relatively centrally-focussed context (Redbridge, 2006b). As attitudes varied across London, a rather assymetric pattern of development emerged across the suburbs, with some Boroughs like Richmond-upon-Thames designating no AAP or SPD areas and others such as Waltham Forest and neighbouring Redbridge designating three or more.

### **3. Case Studies: Methodology**

In order to investigate in detailed practice the often complex relationship between the various contextual trends and policy objectives outlined above, three suburban design frameworks were selected as case studies. The three case studies revealed a wide range of justifications for and trends within new development that would have been missed if only one or two had been chosen; the three case studies selected also differed socioeconomically, politically and morphologically, which enabled analysis across a range of scales and contexts.

Many suburban centre frameworks, such as Kingston (Kingston, 2006) and Romford (Urban Practitioners, 2005) are extant but not yet at a sufficiently advanced stage to be analysed; others, notably Brentford (Hounslow, 2005) remain trapped in a land-use planning framework, rendering them useless for a design-oriented study; the fact that such an approach can still prevail raises a whole host of other questions beyond the remit of the current study.

Of the remaining candidates, Ilford, Bromley and Mitcham were selected as providing a representative sample, for reasons explained fully below. A desk-based review of relevant documents was supplemented by a semi-structured interview of approximately 45 minutes in length with the Borough representative(s) responsible for the urban design content and broad planning objectives of the new development. In the case of Ilford and Bromley, this resulted in a one-on-one interview; in the case of Mitcham, the lead urban designer and lead regeneration specialist contributed simultaneously. Edited transcripts of all three interviews appear in Appendices 1-3 of this document. The main purpose of the interviews was twofold: firstly to gain knowledge of the context behind and the rationale for the development directions being promoted and secondly to gauge more generally attitudes toward and prospects for urban design in suburban London.





**Figure 5: Location of Case Study Areas in London.** Bromley, Ilford and Mitcham shown within the context of Greater London Boroughs; they are located respectively within the suburban London Boroughs of Bromley, Redbridge and Merton.

## **4. Case Studies**

### **4a. Ilford**

Ilford is a large, relatively 'urban' town centre in the East London sub-region. Its AAP is development-led, aided by a total lack of conservation areas and very few listed buildings within a poor-quality modernist townscape; it envisages that large-scale residential, retail and office architecture, together with improvements to the public realm, can create local distinctiveness and enhance the economic performance of the centre as a whole. An interview was held with Murray Broad, Senior Policy Planner at the London Borough of Redbridge (Redbridge, 2006b).

The interview confirmed the development-led approach of the AAP document. Redbridge justify their plans by pointing to the nearby development in the Thames Gateway and at the Stratford Olympics site; there is a feeling that Ilford must compete as it does not want to be left behind as a retail destination. Redbridge also feel that Ilford can make a significant contribution in terms of housing provision; Ilford was the only one of the three case study areas identified as an Opportunity Area in the London Plan (GLA, 2004:241), based on its brownfield capacity and high public transport accessibility. Furthermore, its urban character is accentuated by a number of tall buildings, including 1960s offices and late 1990s apartment blocks; more tall buildings are envisaged, with the council seeing the distinctive skyline thus created as justifiable in townscape terms by providing 'a sense of identity to an otherwise sprawling built-up locality' (Tugnut and Robinson, 1987:25), as well as improved legibility (Tibbalds, 2001:63). Planners are hoping that the high densities achieved by such development will relieve pressure on infill and backlands sites in some of Redbridge's lower density residential suburbs (where in the view of the council, development-related discontent has been growing) by achieving much of the Borough's London Plan housing targets in one geographical location (Redbridge, 2006a:68).



The AAP is extremely design-oriented, with many pages of sophisticated townscape analysis, explanatory 3D diagrams, division of new development into character areas, extensive consideration of movement networks and so on (Redbridge, 2004 and 2006a:32-39, 74-83). It leans heavily on design considerations embodied in guidance such as 'Responsive Environments' (Bentley et al, 1985), 'By Design' (DETR/CABE, 2000) and the Urban Design Compendium (English Partnerships, 2000); there is certainly no evidence in Redbridge of the alleged national and Londonwide shortage of basic design skills in local authorities (for example CABE, 2001; Planning in London, 2005). This strong and deliberate design orientation has the explicit aim of combatting placelessness. Given its lack of historic environment and open space, Redbridge recognise that Ilford is among the most 'placeless' of the case study areas, and that 'sometimes, justification for total change will arise from the absence of any worthwhile or redeeming features in the urban scene' (Parfect and Power, 1997:137). The Borough sees redesign of the public realm at Ilford Station as the key to creating place from scratch through an enhanced arrival experience; the redevelopment of the station to accommodate Crossrail offers the opportunity to set it back from the main road and create a new pedestrian square and bus interchange surrounded on three sides by tall, mixed-use glass towers with active ground-floor frontages (Redbridge, 2006a:48). Although such bold development is certainly exciting, whether it can transform urban space into urban 'place' depends on a number of factors over and above mere morphology. It is therefore not yet clear, no matter how comprehensive the drawings and sketches, to what extent 'place' will in fact be created or enhanced in Ilford.



**Figures 6-9: Illustrations accompanying the Ilford Town Centre Area Action Plan.** Redbridge have incorporated perhaps the most comprehensive illustrative material of all of the case studies (Redbridge, 2006a).

However ambitious the AAP's vision may be, there remains, with the exception of its comprehensive public transport improvements, a reluctance to tackle sustainability. The AAP is notable for its lack of consideration of eco-friendly features that could and by now should be integral to any urban design framework. Murray Broad justified this by claiming that the LDF's policies on environmental sustainability were still being finalised, and would be added to a later edition of the AAP (Redbridge, 2006b).

The council agrees that urban design appears to be operating on ever-larger scales. This view is driven by Murray Broad's perception that increasingly, suburban Londoners are choosing which suburban centres to shop at in a more fluid way. Rather than displaying

loyalty to their closest centre, people visit a variety of centres, often motivated by the differences between them, such as retail offer and environmental quality. Redbridge therefore see image and transport playing an ever larger part in maintaining Ilford's economic performance and status. The AAP recognises and welcomes the investment in orbital public transport systems occurring in the subregion with the planning of East London Transit that will link Ilford to the neighbouring centre of Barking and to the Thames Gateway growth area beyond.

The AAP documents and the interview revealed clearly that for Ilford, the London Plan's perceived focus on central and inner eastern areas of the city, particularly in employment terms, was a major driver for development. Redbridge feel aggrieved by a lack of a strategic role for suburbs in the London Plan, believing that, though Ilford's designation as an area of opportunity was welcome, it was motivated more by the fortuitious location of brownfield and underused land close to a transport hub than by any integrated strategy for suburban centres across London. In the council's view, a truly sustainable development strategy for the capital must take more account of suburban areas, and particularly of their employment role- Redbridge feel that the London Plan is unbalanced in choosing to be interventionist in some areas (for example housing and environmental sustainability) but not in others.

#### **4b. Bromley**

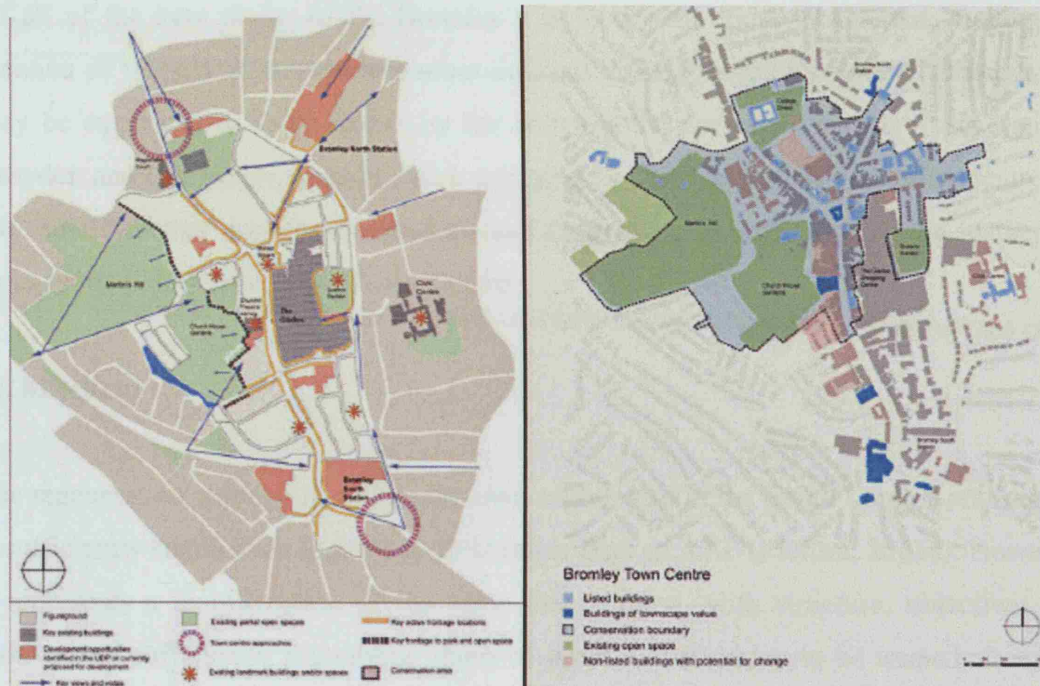
Bromley town centre, in the South London subregion, is comparable in size to Ilford but differs drastically in context. A large part of the town centre is a conservation area, focused around surviving Victorian and Edwardian development and local open spaces (Bromley, 2006b:58); however, poor-quality late 20th-century development exists in the south of the study area. The AAP's cautious, conservation-led approach is governed as much by local political attitudes as by design considerations. The promotion of medium-scale retail and residential-led development has the stated aim of replacing the worst of the existing townscape and enhancing the Conservation Area. An interview was held with Stewart Clarke, Urban Designer at the London Borough of Bromley (Bromley, 2006c).

It was clear from both AAP documents and the interview that the primary driver for Bromley is a fear of being left behind in retail competition with neighbouring centres, with Croydon and Bluewater figuring most frequently as threats (Bromley, 2006a:9 and 2006b:38-44). The loss in retail floorspace caused by the recent closure of two major department stores was the immediate trigger for action, and a long list of high street retailers clamouring for local floorspace appears in the AAP documentation (2006b:116).

With retail as such a strong driver, the AAP often gives the impression that placemaking forms only a secondary consideration. Bromley appear to have sidestepped the issue in any case through their conservation-led attitude (*ibid*:6); most local residents and visitors to Bromley in search of a sense of place would find it hard to object to conserving and enhancing the attractive North Village while simultaneously redeveloping the poor-quality Bromley South. However, the new development at Bromley South may yet prove to be a bone of contention; its large-scale, retail-driven character may enhance the shopping-mall placelessness (not mentioned by the AAP) that is already an unfortunate feature of the Glades centre to its immediate north.

The urban design dimension of the AAP, as elsewhere, appears comprehensive and fully informed by the main theoretical features; there exist, however, significant tensions within the documentation between pure design considerations and the development interests that drove the AAP's preparation. A good example of such tension is the baseline design appraisal's criticism of the scale, form and impermeability of the Glades shopping centre (Bromley, 2006b:60) that leads the reader to suppose that a key design objective might be to reduce its mass, increase its permeability or otherwise encourage its redesign; in fact, the draft AAP (Bromley, 2006a:33-4) recognises its economic success and envisages its further extension in the interests of providing additional retail floorspace!





**Figures 10 and 11: Illustrations accompanying Bromley AAP documentation (Bromley, 2006a).**

Bromley's graphic material contrasts strongly with Ilford's, consisting almost entirely of lower-quality, 2D maps of existing development. The AAP's cautious approach appears to preclude illustration of any new development envisaged for the future.

As in Ilford, an emphasis on the promotion of sustainable transport networks within the study area (2006a:38; 2006b:74-104) is not matched by the promotion of environmental sustainability within new development, which is conspicuous by its total absence from the AAP. The Borough feels that this may have been as a result of sustainability theory not being fully developed alongside the otherwise robust design strategy promoted at the analysis and prescription stages, and echo Redbridge in claiming that this forms a problem to be addressed at a later stage as the AAP process moves closer to future adoption.

Of all of the case study AAPs, Bromley's is by far the most introverted, making no mention of movement networks or other linkages to neighbouring centres. Although this may be explained to some extent by the above-noted competition with rivals such as Croydon and Lewisham, there is also a worrying lack of integration with other centres in the same Borough such as Beckenham and Orpington, as well with as the residential areas immediately around the Town Centre.

#### **4c. Mitcham**

The regeneration strategy for Mitcham town centre, also in the South London sub-region, is sufficiently small-scale to form an SPD rather than an AAP (Merton, 2006a). However, it represents a manifestation of the same design trend, with structure, objectives and motivations sufficiently resembling those of Ilford and Bromley to be treated alongside these larger schemes for the purposes of this study, notwithstanding its different legal status.

Unlike the railway-driven urbanisation of Bromley and Ilford, Mitcham's historical development was based on the now-defunct tramway system (Weinreb and Hibbert, 1993:537). The town centre has therefore always lacked a train station, and must now rely only on buses and pedestrian links to nearby stations; the quantum of new development envisaged is correspondingly far smaller than in the other two case studies. Like Bromley, the town centre includes a significant number of historic buildings and open spaces, ensuring a conservation-based approach to new development (ibid: 12). An interview was held with Paul Garrett, Urban Designer and Brian Hodge, Regeneration Team Leader, both of the London Borough of Merton (Merton, 2006c).

Unlike in Bromley and Ilford, the main rationale for Mitcham's regeneration was the extensive local social deprivation exacerbated by poor-quality retail facilities. This necessitates the design of new development addressing the socioeconomic requirements and expectations of local residents (Merton, 2006a:11). Regeneration is strongly public-sector led, to the extent that Merton, starting from a base of zero developer interest, have

actively persuaded a number of developers to take part in the project who would not have signed up otherwise. Now that Asda have agreed to anchor the town centre's new retail offer, other retailers have begun to show interest.

Like in Bromley and Ilford, the design content of the Mitcham development brief reflects fully the theories of the 1990s urban design agenda, albeit at a far smaller scale (2006a:30-60). The council see the broad design objectives as retaining and strengthening the existing urban grain, which they feel contributes strongly to a sense of place, while at the same time accommodating medium-scale new retail with residential units above. Throughout the documentation and interview, a strong direction emerges of enhancing existing local distinctiveness. The survival of a large number of distinctive older buildings, most facing south in a memorable setting on the town green comprises an asset for which, according to Brian Hodge, 'most people working on town centres would give their right arm'. Merton therefore feel able largely to reject suburban placelessness as a serious issue in Mitcham and feel confident that new development embodying a traditional mix of uses can enhance the existing strong sense of place; indeed, the interview demonstrated that Merton feel that this objective is facilitated in suburban contexts by the smaller amount of development pressure on land.



**Figures 12-15: Local distinctiveness in and around Mitcham (Geograph, 2006).** These well-loved and historic buildings and landscape features differentiate the town from neighbouring suburban centres and contribute strongly to a sense of place. Merton's SPD strategy is attempting to enhance their settings and access through sensitive new development.

Mitcham's design strategy is the only one of the three studied that promotes environmental sustainability objectives for all new development, including a combined heat and power scheme, mini-wind turbines and the use of solar power (2006a:61-62; 2006b:46-59). Merton see themselves, rightly, as ahead of other Boroughs in this respect-their policy on the use of at least 10% renewable energy for new development was one of the first in the country. Paul Garrett pointed to an extensive knowledge base of environmental issues within the council that he and other designers were able to use in order to build principles of sustainability into new development, although he still felt that for town centre redevelopment more generally, leadership on planning and design-related environmental sustainability should be more forcefully expressed in central government guidance.



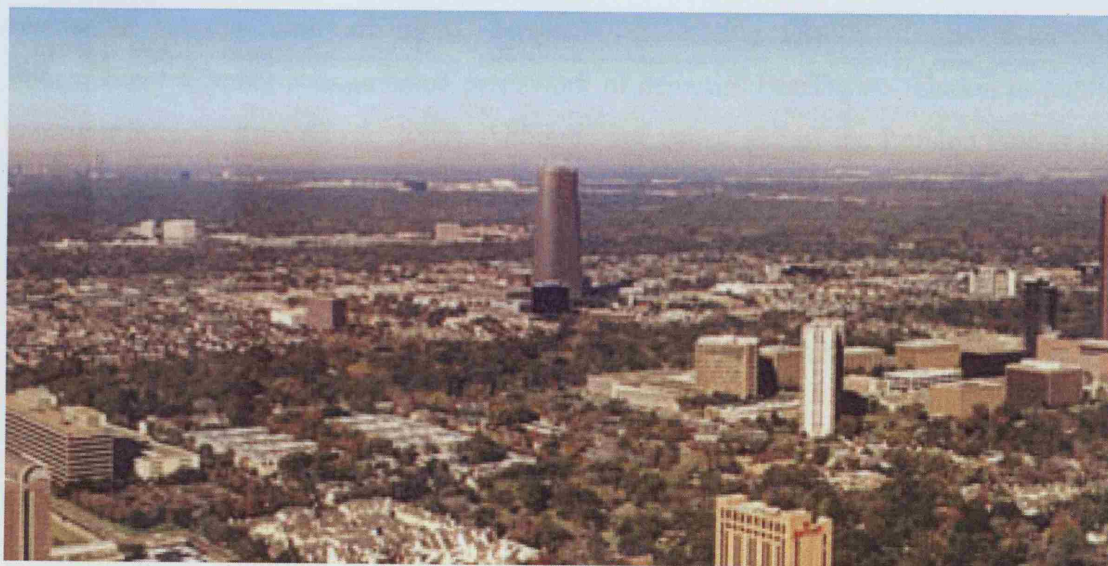
The development brief for Mitcham relates the town centre to some extent to surrounding centres such as Colliers Wood, Tooting and Mitcham Junction (2006a:23). However, with its lack of train or tram station, this relationship is more out of necessity than as part of a strategy to create or enhance movement networks. The interview highlighted that Mitcham residents tend to shop for all but day-to-day convenience goods in Croydon or Central London, and the council therefore do not see competition in retail terms with other subregional centres as a driver for redevelopment; the intention is to design Mitcham as a 'niche' market that can provide a different offer from surrounding centres through local distinctiveness and environmental quality.

## 5. Analysis

The following section will comment upon the variety of trends and phenomena hitherto uncovered, as well as outlining their implications if left unchecked. The intention of comprehensive commentary can be greatly simplified if the preceding sections are taken together, integrating the findings of the Context section with the case study evidence to form a single introductory survey that can set the background for and feed directly into the various strands of analysis presented below.

Firstly, case study evidence confirms that the urban design dimension of the new frameworks for suburban centres in London reflects most aspects of the modern urban design agenda as well as government guidance including PPS1: Delivering Sustainable Development and PPS6: Planning for Town Centres (ODPM, 2005b, 2005c). The documents and interviews provide strong evidence for the extensive theoretical treatment of urban design in recent years at a number of levels having permeated local authority consciousness and being reflected in practical (and in many cases, ambitious) placemaking objectives. Although the creation or enhancement of a sense of place may, as previously noted, be particularly appropriate in a suburban context, the emphasis in all case studies on either a 'sense of place', 'local distinctiveness', a 'niche' identity for suburban town centres or a combination of all three is surprising as well as welcome. This is because many of the same authorities, until very recently, did not previously have a good track record in design, often permitting the large-scale erosion of the local distinctiveness they now see as all-important. New suburban centre AAPs offer, therefore, a number of advantages. As well as helping to bridge the increasingly problematic urban design application 'gap' that existed between mixed-use city-centres and monofunctional residential suburbs, they can also, if applied correctly, enhance the benefits of and build on the existing distinctiveness of the pattern of historic town centres engulfed by the outward spread of London that they form a part of (Whitehand and Carr, 2001:37; Pharoah, 1991:144), thereby offering the most immediate, reliable strategy for challenging the placelessness blighting so much of the 20th-century built environment of suburbia.

The AAPs and SPDs signify in all cases that high density, mixed use development benefitting the image and sustainability of London as a whole is being shifted to a less congested, less expensive, lower-density suburban zone. This interventionist approach to guiding development is creating logical density gradients that increase with proximity to transport-based suburban town centre development. Such transport-sensitive density gradients help reduce the need to travel, particularly by private car. Suburban town centre development frameworks may help avoid the random, unplanned spread of former city-centre employment and retail functions throughout the residential periphery of cities that has occurred in many American suburbs where interventionist planning of this nature has been absent. This phenomenon has been described by Masotti and Hadden (1971) as the ‘urbanisation of the suburbs’, by Knox and Ozolins (2000:136) as ‘postsuburban urbanisation’ and by Garreau (1991) as ‘Edge City’. Where it has occurred, the growth in congestion as people drive within the periphery in a variety of directions to a range of monofunctional employment and retail destinations have seriously undermined the sense of place, environmental and social quality of residential areas (Cervero, 1986 and 1989:4; Barnett, 2003:168).



**Figure 16: Typical ‘edge city’ development in Houston, USA.** Monofunctional, congestion-generating and inward-looking commercial and retail developments dispersed erratically throughout residential suburbia (Ryerson University, 2006).

In terms of residential development, all three case studies showcase the opportunities and advantages for Boroughs to consolidate a significant proportion of their stringent housing targets set centrally by the GLA into higher-density areas of public transport accessibility where existing taller buildings and a lack of residential population make additional residential capacity easier to justify and to deliver on a number of fronts. Bromley sees a residential population as key to providing natural surveillance that can help to reduce the anti-social behaviour that plagues the town centre at evenings and weekends (Bromley, 2006a:21); Ilford sees tall apartment blocks as critical to improving the housing mix in an area with a current oversupply of larger units and undersupply of small units (Redbridge, 2004:27); and Mitcham hopes to attract a 'new and more diverse' residential population that can boost the local economy (Merton, 2006a:63). In all cases, the advantages to the Boroughs of promoting residential growth within suburban centres are further enhanced by research showing that car ownership and use among town and city centre residents is 'significantly less than the national average' (Coupland, 1997:276), as well as the relieving of densification pressure on existing residential suburbs, where high-density infill development is frequently unpopular with local residents (Walker, 1992:152; Schoon, 2001:239). Left unchecked, such infill can replace attractive, successful residential suburbs with urbanised, congestion-generating islands of inward-looking development forming a fragmented patchwork of densities bearing no relation to public transport infrastructure (Rose, 2002). Although one stated aim of the London Plan is the promotion of high density development at nodes of high public transport accessibility, its lack of suburban focus means that not enough is being done to counter continuing suburban infill away from town centres, which threatens to erode the very qualities that made suburbia successful in the first place, as well as fanning political discontent (URBED, 2002:28).

However, notwithstanding the numerous gains in terms of sustainability and the conservation of suburban residential quality offered by suburban town centre design frameworks in London, their relatively sudden and randomly distributed emergence in response to a wide variety of factors must be considered to be problematic in terms of the current planning context set by the London Plan. The Plan's generally monocentric

concentration of employment and related functions appears to be threatened, particularly by the new employment development envisaged for Ilford and Bromley. If all suburban centres across London were to adopt a similar approach in future, assuming an unchanged monocentric development context, the result would be an un-coordinated spread of employment and other functions in centres across the metropolis guided more by market forces including competition and value for money rather than by strategic-level public-sector intervention. Such an unco-ordinated spread may in the long-term, begin to affect the vitality and viability of Central London in unpredictable ways as some of its functions decamp to the suburban centres in this relatively market-led context.

The more strategic gains in sustainability achievable through suburban town centre development are not generally supported at local level. With the exception of Mitcham, whose development is guided by an unusually progressive Borough in environmental terms, the suburban AAPs do not integrate closely sustainability and design objectives despite the ecological focus of modern urban design theory (Bentley, 1990, quoted in Punter, 1999b:139). Solar panels, wind turbines, layouts for passive solar gain, composting schemes, CHP schemes, sustainable urban drainage systems and so on should nowadays be considered as much a component of urban design as should considerations of massing, layout, permeability and legibility. The London Plan's notable and admirable cross-cutting of environmental sustainability with planning objectives (GLA, 2004:10) is threatened unless such a commitment is echoed at local level.

Macro-design appears, as noted above, to be an as yet untested strategy in the context of London's suburbs, notwithstanding the more strategic, less prescriptive approach to urban design beginning to operate in the AAPs and SPDs of individual Boroughs. Case study evidence shows that the relatively new approach of urban design frameworks controlling, guiding and promoting broad principles for change without being prematurely prescriptive offer the advantage of certainty without compromising flexibility for developers, advantages that may be replicable at a macro-level (Cowan, 2002:12-13; see also DETR/CABE, 2000:49). However, given that suburban centre design frameworks appear to be emerging independently in spite of rather than as a result of the regional

planning context, it is perhaps unsurprising that few links exist between their locally-formulated design objectives and more strategic design considerations at regional and subregional level (in the unlikely event of any considerations currently existing). The lack of linkages between the suburban centre development frameworks and regional policy is likely also to be a factor in the former's general non-integration of environmental sustainability objectives, despite their comprehensive promotion at London Plan level.

The current absence of strategic urban design in London is not unusual. Despite the increased theoretical debate on what the form of a sustainable city region could, or should be like (see, for example, Haughton and Hunter, 1994; Stretton, 1989; Welbank, 1996), a lack of design policy exists at the highest level in Britain. Madanipour (1997:366) blames a variety of political, economic and cultural factors for having pushed design policy into ever smaller-scale interventions. Punter and Carmona (1997:144) agree, elaborating further: for them, the practical absence of macro-design is 'a symptom of the reactive mode into which planning at large has been forced as the public sector's role in development has diminished and as deregulation has more strongly asserted the role of market forces'.

Ironically, such reactivity is not a problem in the London Plan: it provides an excellent example of a document formulated in response to such analyses, incorporating as it does a number of proactive, interventionalist strategic policies. Many policy areas, therefore, enjoy strategic attention and prescription at the level of the city-region: the primary reason for the lack of design strategy in our suburban field of interest, it must therefore be concluded, is the Plan's general avoidance of the suburbs. It calls for transport investment in radial capacity such as Crossrail (GLA, 2004:108) to underpin the pattern of increased commutation to central London. With movement between suburbs rather than from suburb to centre on the increase, such a strategy misses an important opportunity for reducing the travel-related ecological footprint of London as a whole; a Plan electing to intervene in many areas also chooses to neglect others.



Although instances of orbital public transport infrastructure such as the Croydon Tramlink have been successfully delivered in London, boosting the economies and images of the suburban centres that they serve as well as cutting the use of private car transport (Geoghegan, 2002) the Plan and its associated SRDFs do not, in general, support further investment of this type that might positively impact on the environmental sustainability of the case study areas and London as a whole; this is a concern given that URBED (2002:iii) found the greatest suburban problem in London, common to a wide variety of suburban contexts, was that of traffic congestion and parking. The East London Transit that will connect Ilford with the Thames Gateway development area is a rare exception to the otherwise gloomy outlook for orbital transport infrastructure (GLA, 2004:245). It is no coincidence that Ilford is by far the most context-sensitive of the three case study areas (Redbridge, 2006a:16-18), demonstrating how East London's orbital transport strategy has enabled Redbridge, in contrast with the other case study Boroughs, to integrate more effectively within its design strategy sustainable transport between Ilford and the rest of the subregion (ibid:20-21).



**Figure 17: The Croydon Tramlink (ICRS, 2006);** an all-too-rare example of new, sustainable orbital transport linking town centres in London's suburbs.

The negative consequences of a lack of consideration of suburban orbital connections are most apparent in Bromley. The inward-looking, retail-led nature of its AAP risks turning the town centre into an unsustainable 'island', unconnected not only with neighbouring large centres such as Croydon and Lewisham but also insufficiently connected with other centres and residential areas even within the same Borough. Although nowadays it is recognised that successful retail-led development is characterised by an accompanying focus on sustainability objectives, including new public transport connections (Dixon and Marston, 2003:38), this has not occurred in Bromley, and the extra car-borne traffic generated by such unconnected town centre development in an already congested suburb is likely further to harm local environmental quality.

Bromley's planners and designers tend to exhibit a 'them or us' mentality, appearing more concerned with matching Croydon's floorspace rather than adding complementarity by enhancing local distinctiveness or creating a 'niche' for the town. The resulting AAP design strategy, incorporating extension of the existing poor-quality, monofunctional and impermeable Glades centre, appears largely dictated by the requirements of the market. Such design objectives are difficult to square with the enhancement of a sense of place as chain stores start to replace locally-owned shops (Montgomery 1998:99); rather, Bromley will increasingly come to resemble the other places with which it is locked into competition.

By contrast, Mitcham's designers are aware that Mitcham cannot and should not compete with neighbouring centres such as Wimbledon, Croydon and Tooting; their design strategy is therefore predicated on enhancing existing local distinctiveness to create a niche function for the town that complements rather than competes with those of surrounding centres (Merton, 2006a:28). However, the development brief is nevertheless careful to integrate within this goal the Borough's stated commitment to tackling local social deprivation. Darley (1993:43) offers support for such integration by pointing out that 'local distinctiveness must be about activity and interaction, not just design or antiquarian romance'. If regeneration is successful, Mitcham could become a model suburban centre, responsive to the needs of the local population while at the same time



adding vitality by attracting visitors from further afield through the enhancement and creation of amenity unavailable in other centres nearby.

## 6. Recommendations

It is clear, therefore, that much needs to be, and can be, done to counter some of the planning and design problems apparent in the status quo. The following section outlines a structure of evidence-based recommendations that could form an alternative planning context for London based on the application of design strategy at a macro-scale. Macro-design offers the potential more effectively to promote the sustainable development not only of London's suburbs but the city-region as a whole. At the level of individual centres, macro-design may also assist in enhancing local distinctiveness and place identity.

Firstly, the GLA must realign existing planning policies towards the suburbs generally, and towards the role of suburban town centres in particular. It must acknowledge the development opportunities, sustainability gains and potential for suburban placemaking offered by the emergence of the suburban centre development frameworks. This may be complicated by the fact that in many cases they have been driven by the GLA's initial lack of consideration of the contribution that suburban Boroughs can make to the capital's development and design objectives. A context must gradually emerge, therefore, where the formulation of suburban centre AAPs and SPDs no longer comprises a potentially problematic phenomenon working generally at cross-purposes with regional planning goals, as is currently the case. Inevitably, given the current context of the suburban centre development having emerged without the input of regional planners, the initial stages of a realignment of Londonwide priorities would force the GLA to have to act reactively to the pattern that has emerged in a bottom-up manner. However, over time, the role of strategic planning could begin to become more proactive, encouraging and promoting design frameworks for other suburban centres able to be linked by orbital public transport to neighbouring centres experiencing redesign.

Once suburban centre development has been thus incorporated into a re-aligned regional and subregional policy context, strategic suburban design policy could begin to be formulated, with the aim of supporting the new planning focus on suburban areas and

complementing the existing 'bottom-up' formulation of detailed design objectives already apparent in suburban centres. Such a dual approach is seen as vital by Barton et al (2003:206), who state that 'there are two complementary approaches to shaping the physical form of towns...both, at some level, are essential. One works upwards from an analysis of the characteristics and potential of individual sites and zones. The other works downwards from a consideration of sustainable urban form'. The 'top-down' approach can help to overcome the inward-looking 'island' mentality highlighted as a negative feature of some case studies by ensuring that 'no place exists as an independent entity....[design] strategies need to relate to their wider context and neighbouring areas' (Carmona et al, 2002:53).

The new strategic design policies should, therefore, build upwards from the most successful dimensions of the current suburban centre design frameworks, including certainty for developers, enhancement of local distinctiveness and direct benefit for local communities.

The possibilities of the upward and outward extension of local-level urban design are clearly displayed in Portland, USA (City of Portland, 1993), a city widely recognised as representing the cutting edge of urban design application (Punter, 1999a). Portland '[developed] design frameworks for its downtown, and progressively extended this strategy into inner-city neighbourhoods, and now into mature suburbs and out to the urban fringe' until the entire city-region was covered by a strategic design framework guiding more local interventions (Punter and Carmona, 1997:146). In Portland and other cities, macro-design is seen as essential because 'it is necessary to have some strategic overview of where development should [occur] in order to ensure that the town, city or region grows efficiently with a minimum of negative externalities...the pattern of growth and change will be critical to the character of the city and its sense of place' (ibid:145). It should be apparent by now that many of the less successful and less sustainable dimensions of suburban centre development in London highlighted by the case studies can trace their origins to the lack of such a strategic overview.



**Figure 18: Macro-scale urban design in Portland, USA (City of Portland, 2004).** City centre strategy, in this illustration aimed at supporting a new light rail project, has now been extended across the entire city-region.

It is clear, therefore, that a central aim of suburban macro-design should be the co-ordination at regional or sub-regional level of the development and design of individual suburban centres with the aim of achieving complementarity between them through enhancing the local distinctiveness of each (Frey, 1999:69). Experience in America has shown that any suburban redevelopment requires ‘some form of regional planning and co-ordination’ in order for benefits to be harnessed and negative externalities to be mitigated (Soja, 1995:134). An example of such a negative externality is the trend apparent in Bromley, where the town centre attempts to outdo its neighbours through delivering ever larger quantities of retail and office floorspace, notwithstanding the likely associated growth in car-based transport and the loss of what may be desirable and distinctive in local design terms. Such an approach, if widely reproduced, threatens the image and urban environment of London as a whole.

For reasons of local economic self-interest, only at a level higher than that of the individual Borough can a workable attempt be made to introduce complementarity rather than competition between larger suburban centres. The case study of Mitcham, whose small size acts as a constraint on inter-centre competition, provides a model of the type of design and development objectives for suburban centres that could be promoted at a strategic level by the GLA. Each centre can create or enhance an existing 'niche' or unique selling point that can attract visitors and external investment through building on the distinctiveness of the 'elements of the original [urban] landscape that remain, sometimes deeply buried beneath the new' (Hough, 1990:181) while at the same time responding to the needs of the local community. Such a model of deliberate differentiation of suburban centres is clearly supported by the mainstream design literature: 'Places need to be unique and different from one another- each rooted in their own particular historical, geographical, physical or cultural context' (Tibbalds, 2001:16).

Critically, the macro-level redesign of London's city-region must also reflect the fact that 'sustainability should set a context for all design policies at all scales' (Punter and Carmona, 1997:90). This requires environmental sustainability to be integrated with urban design at all levels in London's suburbs. As highlighted by Paul Garrett in the Mitcham case study (Merton, 2006c), this must comprise a top-down objective. It is only at a strategic, city-region level that the promotion of sustainable urban design will be effective (Greed, 1998:202); regional 'macro-designers' must therefore guide the sustainability of more local design interventions. Marvin and Guy (1997:312) agree, blaming continuing environmental inaction on a pervasive myth that 'the treatment of environmental problems needs to be tackled at local level', a position reinforced more recently by new research findings ('I Will If You Will', SCR, 2006) that sustainability objectives can only succeed when promoted nationally and regionally as a top-down approach rather than relying on individual actions. 'The focus needs to be on creating a supportive framework for collective progress, rather than exhorting individuals [in the present case, London Boroughs] to go against the grain. This is the approach.....encapsulated in the notion of 'I will if you will'' (ibid: 1). The publication of the new SPG guiding sustainable design and construction (GLA, 2006a) is encouraging,

showing as it does that regional planners are beginning to recognise the validity of such an approach, as well as acknowledging that the emphasis on environmental sustainability that permeates all aspects of the capital's regional plan is irrelevant unless it can be applied practically at local level. Despite the new SPG, Bromley and Ilford's plans for major new development remain unacceptable; environmental sustainability is not at present sufficiently covered by urban design objectives. This will remain the case even if, as promised in both cases, sustainability considerations are 'tacked on' at a later date.

All three case studies highlighted the great variety of perceived advantages to be gained from increasing the residential population of suburban centres- this should therefore comprise one objective of strategic design policy, encouraging the promotion of mixed-use, high-density residential-led development for every suburban centre exhibiting appropriate capacity. Ensuring the sustained flow of both visitors and local residents to and from the centres that would be required by their increased residential populations and for economic growth more generally can be underpinned by the macro-design of movement networks between centres.

A further primary objective of macro-scale design strategy should be the facilitation and promotion of sustainable orbital movement, which is particularly important in the context of suburban London (URBED, 2002:53) but notable by its absence in the majority of case studies. Over time the linkages could coalesce into a citywide capital web of orbital movement supporting the primary macro-design objective of developmental co-ordination and providing the public transport based on existing movement patterns that must accompany any context of increased suburban densities and concentrations (Barton, 1992:209; Jenks et al, 1996:342). Such a network would stimulate along its length higher-density and mixed-use development in areas currently comprising monofunctional residential suburbia, thereby promoting sustainable travel patterns and easing yet further the pressure for infill currently being experienced even at locations of low public transport accessibility.



The successful application of the strategies and contextual transformation recommended above might represent a first step on a path towards a more polycentric pattern of development, which could enhance the capital's overall sustainability by transforming the current monocentric focus into a 'multifocal urban structure' offering enhanced sustainability (Barton, 1992:211). Polycentricity of employment functions in particular, dispersed evenly throughout a capacity-related hierarchy of suburban centres and underpinned by investment in orbital rather than radial transport networks, would offer a significant opportunity to increase the environmental sustainability of the entire city-region by reducing travel-to-work distances. The full rationale for and potential benefits of city-region level polycentricity is discussed in greater depth by Hague (2003) and by Maguire et al (2004), which includes a particular emphasis on its potential application in London.

## 7. Conclusion

In London, a new trend in urban design has become apparent: its application within the hitherto untouched field of suburban town centres. Most of the new design-led AAPs and SPDs currently being drafted by suburban Boroughs show a strong awareness of the fundamentals of urban design as expressed by the 1990s urban design renaissance in Britain; in the majority of cases, design quality is seen as providing economic, social, and environmental benefit as well as helping to create a sense of place.

However, at present, thanks to a regional plan which most commentators and practitioners agree lacks strategic coverage for London's suburban areas, the local planning documents that have emerged, however sophisticated their local design objectives, comprise only a random pattern of strategically insignificant, bottom-up responses. For the moment, the regional context ensures that such responses represent, if anything, political threats rather than urban design opportunities; this is reflected in the haphazard and assymetric manner in which they have spontaneously emerged across London. This lack of both developmental co-ordination and acknowledgement of the advantages to be gained from the AAPs and SPDs at regional level has resulted in local-level parochiality, with individual Boroughs forced to consider only the local issues within their study area. To reverse this parochiality, a more positive attitude towards macro-design needs to evolve. In the current context, the highest level of strategic design able to be promoted in London can occur only within rather than across Borough boundaries.

Despite most of the new design frameworks in London having taken on board the plethora of design guidance that has emerged in recent years, they also tend to ignore, perhaps with the exception of their relatively robust public transport strategies, the critical dimension of environmental sustainability. Although exactly the same problem was highlighted in London's suburban planning four years ago by URBED (2002:41), little has changed in the intervening period. Given the notable focus at regional level on sustainability considerations, as embodied by the London Plan, more vertical integration

of environmental sustainability is required at a hierarchy of scales down to the most local (Owens, 1992:101), a fact now beginning to be recognised by the GLA.

Case study evidence shows that some of the new development proposals should not be permitted in their current form. Even if the two AAPs examined that are currently deficient in this regard were to 'tack on' sustainability considerations at a later date, the design agenda has evolved sufficiently, with 'urban environmental design' now considered as a desirable objective, for this to be regarded as unacceptable. Environmental sustainability must be embedded at the start of the design process.

The GLA, at both regional and sub-regional level, should recognise that this phenomenon of suburban centre design-led development is occurring: it must simultaneously respond to its implications and act to neutralise some of the negative externalities of currently envisaged development. The present context of bottom-up development must be replaced by co-ordination and integration of individual suburban centre development at a strategic level of design. Such macro-design can also promote sustainable urban form by guiding orbital connections between centres, constituting a workable alternative to unsustainable, car-based travel patterns between newly developed suburban centres. In many American suburbs witnessing such unco-ordinated suburban centre development from an earlier date, congestion has reached unsustainable levels. Macro-level guidance and design of suburban centre development also offers the opportunity to ensure, from the highest level of intervention downwards, that sustainability considerations become fully integrated within design at the local level.

Macro-scale co-ordination of suburban centre development could also, paradoxically, enhance distinctiveness at local level, helping suburban centres to counter the 'placelessness' suffered as a result of large-scale, monotonous 20th century suburban development. Although case studies demonstrated that the creation or enhancement of a sense of place was a key concern in most cases, competition-based, market-led development such as Bromley's threatens local distinctiveness and placemaking objectives by looking to recreate the offer of other suburban centres. In the case of

Bromley, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that rather than building on the existing character of the study area, the town centre will come increasingly to resemble Croydon, as it adds increased retail floorspace of the ‘clone town’ variety (Conisbee et al, 2005) that has eroded local distinctiveness in so many cities and suburbs.



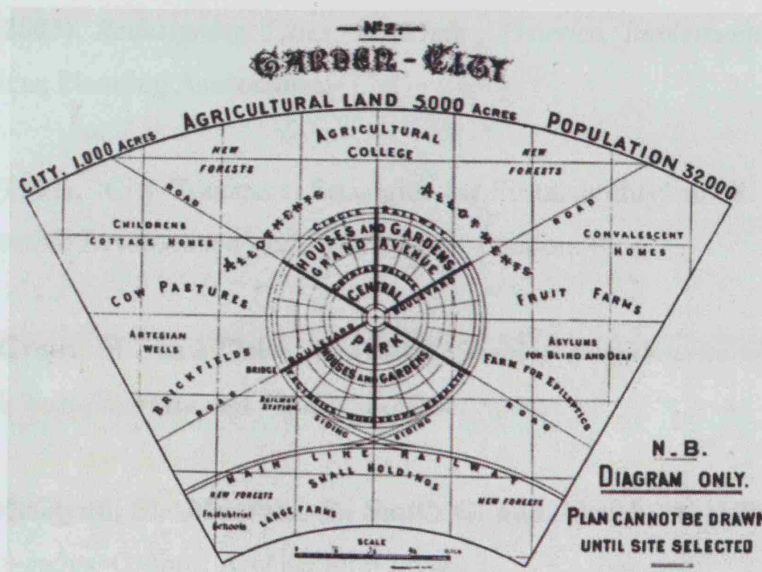
**Figure 19: An illustration from the ‘Clone Town Britain’ report (Conisbee et al, 2005:40).** Does more of this type of retail constitute a sustainable future for Bromley? Or might a strategic design framework guide the town centre away from retail competition with Croydon and Bluewater and towards greater enhancement of local distinctiveness?

Macro-scale design strategy guiding suburban centre development should steer individual centres towards a particular ‘niche’ role for their subregion through the creation of ‘clear identities and complementary functions’ for each one (RTPI, in GLA, 2003). Due to its smaller size and correspondingly more limited potential to outdo neighbouring centres, Mitcham’s design strategy, uniquely, was able to escape the negative cycle of inter-centre competition. Through enhancing existing local distinctiveness and historic townscape, it seeks to attract additional residents and visitors bringing economic spend and vitality, while still ensuring that new development responds to the requirements of the local community.

Once such a major policy realignment has occurred in London, the city-region in general and its suburbs in particular may be able to share the economic, social and environmental benefits experienced by cities like Portland and Birmingham further along the path of strategic design. Macro-design guiding local suburban centre functions could form the first step in a process of city-region restructuring, culminating in a system of sustainable polycentric economic development embodying 'decentralised concentration' of previously central functions including employment, leisure and retail (Owens and Rickaby, 1992). Restructuring along these lines could offer a pattern of development for the city as a whole finally progressing beyond the unsustainable but persistent 20th-century model of city-centre commerce surrounded by endless residential sprawl.



It may be appropriate to conclude by going back to the very roots of modern town planning by acknowledging, perhaps surprisingly, that the central argument of this report was first articulated by Ebenezer Howard in 1898. Howard envisaged ‘town clusters’, with ‘each town in the cluster being of different design from the others, and yet the whole forming part of one large and well-thought out plan’ (Howard, 1902:102, in Thomas and Cousins, 1996:330). The challenge now is to reapply this 104-year old theory of placemaking to the sustainable design and planning of London’s suburbs in the 21st century.



**Figure 20:** A town in one of Ebenezer Howard’s ‘town clusters’ (Howard, 1902). The wedge-shaped hinterland slots into a circle surrounding a ‘central city’; it was presumably from this central city that Howard envisaged co-ordination of the design of the other towns in the cluster by means of a ‘large and well-thought-out plan’ or what today we would call strategic macro-design.

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## **Appendix 1: Edited Transcript of Ilford Interview**

(Murray Broad, Senior Policy Planner, London Borough of Redbridge)

MB: There's insufficient attention been given to suburbs in the UK, and particularly in the London context. I know that some of the changes being proposed to the London Plan at the moment do attempt to redress that imbalance but [currently] there's a lot of planning for the central city area and a big blank for the suburbs. One of the criticisms that's been made of the growth targets of the London Plan is that it has a one-dimensional focus on housing. But if we're going to make it work as sustainable communities we need a rounded approach to what's happening out in the suburbs.

JH: I noted that the Ilford AAP merges design and planning goals, which I think is a good thing. Some plans separate them out, and put urban design in a separate 'box'.

MB: Well, life's not like that, is it?

JH: Was a proactive approach difficult/unusual?

MB: Maybe the way to approach it is to talk about what happened as we sat down to produce the LDF. The first thing that was apparent was that Ilford is smack-bang in the middle of a hothouse of development in the East of London and the South East of England. And the Mayor's got his plans for housing growth and the Government's got its growth corridors in the Thames Gateway and up the M11. And the 2004 Planning Act says we can't ignore that, we're part of it and we've got to reflect those plans in our local documents. So it was clear that we had to provide for significant growth and change in the borough, particularly for housing targets.

The Act also says that you've got to go out and consult the local community in a continuous process; what we discovered was a great deal of scepticism about the growth agenda. People thought it would lead to excessive densities in residential areas and undermine their character. They were worried we would build on open spaces and the

green belt- and they were worried that we wouldn't be able to find the physical and social infrastructure to support the housing growth.

So the core strategy was to accept significant growth in the Borough, we're going to concentrate it in the town centres and particularly in Ilford, as our only metropolitan centre; we'll be very growth-oriented, which will allow us to defend the character of more residential areas. No proposals for increasing densities in residential areas and none for building in the green belt- the trade-off is a very large amount in the town centre.

In the past, planning documents have been seen by [council] members as a way of stopping development from happening, and you have to be able to do that, but this plan is more proactive and it's about *encouraging* development.

JH: Who's driving development?

MB: To date, it's been private housing led. It [the town centre] was deserted at night because nobody lived there. At that time, the council was getting significant applications for tall apartment blocks, and there was a fear that this would lead to uncontrolled development of tall buildings across the town centre. At that stage, the council wanted to control development- we knew that tall buildings would play a role, but we wanted to apply some logic to their location.

JH: But is the location of tall buildings so important, given that there are no listed buildings or conservation areas to worry about?

MB: It's something that we pick up a lot on in consultation- the majority were sceptical about tall buildings. But consultation doesn't mean that you always agree with what they're saying- you just have a responsibility to listen and consider- if you depart from that, you need a good reason. A lot of people remember the 60s and 70s towerblocks- there's concerns about overshadowing and wind tunnel effects. But we are in the process

of approving a 21-storey building on the High Street- and 1 year ago a 31-storey building was approved.

JH: Placelessness is an adjective often applied to urban centres- how can the strategy overcome this?

MB: I don't think tall buildings on their own will do that. But it is a problem- although we are one of the 10 metropolitan centres in London, people haven't heard of Redbridge or in some cases, even Ilford, despite being home to 250,000 people. But there's nothing in particular that grabs you about the place- there's nothing in particular you can point to. Some people see this as a problem, but some people living out in the suburbs, particularly the leafy, green ones in the north of the Borough away from the hustle and bustle, it's the way they want it. There's a lot of people who don't like the growth agenda- if you go back to the last election, Labour lost a lot of seats in the outer suburbs of London and that was down to the reaction of those living there against the growth agenda.

I think the key area to change in terms of image/sense of place is the area around the station. I've always thought that those public entry points to places are particularly important. But it's crowded, there are people scrambling onto buses and trains and nothing's integrated, there's no disabled access there, you come out of the station and you can't even tell where the town centre is- if you're a visitor, why *would* you go and seek out the shopping area? But Crossrail coming through has given us a fantastic opportunity and the existing station will be demolished and set back from the main road, there'll be a big public square there with bus interchange which will be more pedestrian-friendly. For me that is the key element in all the new development to create a sense of place. Tall buildings are merely practical, in terms of density.

JH: Do you see urban design becoming larger in spatial scale?

MB: It has to. The town centre operates as a town centre unit. One of the issues in preparing the plan was a major retail study to find out where the retail spend was going.

We found that Ilford is part of a well-connected set of town centres in the east of London and it's easy to choose between one or the other. No one has a protected market. If you're not getting the retail mix you need or the environment you want, people just shift to another. Ilford was losing significant retail spend to Romford and Lakeside and Stratford was developing. We found merely maintaining the current retail level would entail an entirely new Exchange Centre and more higher-end retail. If this is not done, we could lose our status as a metropolitan centre- we have to treat the town centre as a whole.

JH: Should the London Plan be co-ordinating development of centres so they are not trapped in this cycle of competition with each other?

MB: It's just a reality. More than ever before, town centres are well-connected. As they extend Crossrail and the DLR and the East London Transit and the Thames Gateway Bridge people have more transport choices than ever before. Cities are competing globally with one another as well- it's just a reality. My gut feeling is that it's a good thing- it keeps people on their toes.

JH: 70% percent of suburban transport is orbital. Ilford is the only one with an orbital dimension to the transport strategy- but it's a two-edged sword.

MB: That's right. You have to accept that the opportunity and the challenge go hand in hand.

JH: What about sustainable development? Surely if all this movement is orbital, it makes less sense to invest in radial public transport, but that's what's happening....

MB: For all the London Plan's sustainability focus it has one fatal flaw- it concentrates key jobs in the centre of London- the global financial and business services sector. Planners in the past have argued- if we can direct the housing market, why can't we direct the employment market?

JH: But the GLA would say that the suburban office market has declined.

MB: There's a lot of evidence to say that's the case. In Ilford, we have a lot of vacant office space. There's some discussion as to the extent to which it's just that the buildings are outdated- the AAP doesn't envisage major expansion of office space, rather refurbishment and modernisation of the offer. It's an interesting and difficult question. Only a few kilometres away at Canary Wharf is the most expensive office space in the world but 15 minutes down the line, the offices are vacant. My response to the GLA is to say that the London Plan is very interventionist when it comes to housing and environmental sustainability, but all of a sudden when it comes to employment there's a far more laissez-faire approach. They are only interventionist when they want to be.

JH: Yes- and what about the London Plan only referring to offices in terms of employment strategy and not, for example, SMEs which are historically strong in Ilford?

MB: We're not getting London Plan support from SME policy, it's true. The GLA say 'we recognise the problem, but we just have to be realistic about the market'.

JH: Do you think the 2004 and 2000 Acts, which give extra power to local government, have made the sorts of AAP that you are doing more possible?

MB: I think they would have emerged anyway. The ultimate drivers are commercial and housing. Ilford has commercial opportunities and sooner or later we would have had to grapple with that. I think there is a greater concern at local government level about sustainable development. In our case, we are focusing growth in the most sustainable location, the town centre, with its transport connections and where there is the widest range of services and facilities to support population growth. I am sceptical about some aspects of the sustainability agenda, for example, sustainability appraisals which are meant to accompany all these documents. Sustainable development should be embedded in planners' thinking from the beginning, but we have this habit of hiving it off as a separate process. It has become a tick-box process, and there is an idea that it is



sustainable just because it has an SA report. It ties up resources and it is not a credible process.

JH: But surely the Ilford AAP doesn't actually embed sustainability from the start either? It is strong on sustainable movement networks, but doesn't include considerations such as solar panels for new development, CHP schemes, wind turbines etc... What about "urban environmental design"?

MB: We haven't, it's true. The reason that it is not dealt with in here, is because it is dealt with in other LDF documents. We have been trying to deal with carbon emissions in more than a rhetorical way. I think the London Plan attitude is rhetorical- what can you realistically do that is commercially viable? We have talked to some of the house-builders, and have formulated targets for renewable energy. It might have been useful to refer to that in the AAP, but we were still debating the other policies as the AAP was being developed.

JH: Was it also a political decision, to omit environmental sustainability, to avoid scaring off developers? There didn't seem to be a problem in other policy areas with duplication, for example I am sure that the other LDF documents also cover sustainable movement strategies...

MB: I don't think so, because when an application comes in it is assessed against the whole of the LDF. We have to include movement strategies in the AAP because we are doing it at a more detailed level than the LDF, eg how to move between Ilford station and the other parts of Ilford, which is not covered in the more strategic LDF. We wanted to avoid rhetorical sustainability policies- some other boroughs do this, eg "we will encourage this, we will encourage that", but at the end of the day what are you going to force developers realistically to do- they could just pick up their development and take it elsewhere. I feel that maintenance issues are a barrier as well- you can install all sorts of solar panes etc on new development, but what happens if it breaks, who is going to fix it? Who is going to pay for the repairs and the maintenance. The boroughs need more

evidence to go on, on what sort of things that you can realistically do. Measurable improvements are needed, not just feelgood policies.

JH: Are you happy with the levels of public consultation that you have achieved- could there/should there be more?

MB: You can always do more. I think we could do it better, which is not always the same thing as more, for instance we mailed out a glossy summary of the brochure to 30,000 local households, including some outside the borough, in Newham. The response rate was extremely disappointing, people treated it as a pizza brochure and threw it in the bin. We had significantly more success when we set up display panels in the Exchange shopping centre, talking to people as they came by. Local government is very good at going through the motions of consultation, with a tick-box mentality but we are not clever enough at that- we need to engage with people on a variety of levels. We also find that the people who tend to respond are older/retired and overwhelmingly white. You are missing out on the views of important sectors of the community. We have actually had better responses to the completed draft because it has concrete proposals for development which people can look at and comment on. We have moved from the general to the specific and it is only at the specific level where people can look at a map and see what is going to happen to them.

JH: What about the new Act introducing the concept of “front loading” consultation?

MB: The idea behind “front loading” is good enough. Under the old system, consultation was only required once it looked like the agenda had already been set. Only details could be commented on. There was no way they were going to change the overall approach. Now people can comment before the planners get too carried away, but most people out there aren’t riveted by town planning. Most people want you to go away and write the plan, and then show them when they can see how it will affect them.

JH: Do you see a gap in the current urban design agenda in terms of urban design in a suburban centre context? What should suburban centre design theory be?

MB: I suspect that in a place like London urban design somewhere like Ilford is treated a bit like they are mini city centres. To a large extent that's true- except for the employment dimension. There's also a whole car parking issue and the treatment of the car, which in the traditional city centre agenda is settled in favour of the pedestrian and public transport. Also, central London now has congestion charging. But some of the comments that we've had are along the lines of 'you're concerned about losing retail spend to places like Romford and Lakeside, so how can you discourage private car use?' this is true- and the reality for a suburban context is that lots of people own cars and will continue to do so, especially so that they can travel orbitally.

JH: So you can't just plan as though the public transport infrastructure's already in place.

MB: Exactly. It's not a central city in terms of the role of the car. I'm wondering if we are being naïve in not talking *more* about how we can accommodate cars in the centre while still improving it as a pedestrian environment. Another thing is about the nature of the community that's developing in the centre; there simply was no community there before. They tend to be young and childless and there's a lot of turnover. But are we building sustainable communities? Should there be larger family units? My answer would be no, because there's no demand for them in the high-rise town centre. As long as there are 3 or 4 bedroom houses in residential areas around the town centre, which there are plenty of here- we have an oversupply of some- then families will live in them. But the literature is only about encouraging this mix in city centres- we don't know for sure yet whether this is achievable or even required in suburban centres. Further research is required.

JH: It is interesting that if you take the close (or 'inner') residential hinterland of the suburban centre, with its family housing, and put the young people's 1 or 2 bed properties in the centre, then you could argue that the whole ensemble would form a sustainable

‘mixed’ community in a way that wouldn’t be possible in central London, with the nearest family housing miles away.....so might this be the basis for a sustainable polycentricism?

MB: Yes. I don’t think there is currently a theory of suburban centre design, and we are making it up as we go along- a ‘suck it and see’ approach. The town centres in London are *not* the city centre, but they’re not the suburbs either- there’s a gap, but there is a demand, particularly in East London for urban renewal and we have to respond to that but without a theory behind it- we’re flying by the seat of our pants.

JH: Ilford’s the most urban of my three case study areas anyway, so if even you are having problems, what hope is there for the more suburban cases?

## **Appendix 2: Edited Transcript of Bromley Interview**

(Stewart Clark, Urban Designer, London Borough of Bromley)

JH: Are the new generation of suburban AAPs more proactive in terms of design than in the past?

SC: I think Bromley's taken on the idea of an AAP because over the last 4-5 years we have been updating the UDP, so we caught ourselves making a UDP just when we need to enter the new planning agenda. Our new plans will have to be differently structured in the future. That's the planning background. The need has been identified in Bromley due to a number of recent problems, such as the loss of two major department stores, creating political will to do something. Historically Bromley has seen itself as a town centre which has its own offer, which has its own character, a certain attraction which is to do with its difference from Croydon. Our strapline is 'clean and green' and we wanted to promote the leafy nature of the streets and the town centre- there's still echoes of the old market town in Bromley. It's a difficult balance between conservation and the needs and demands of the local and wider population. An AAP can deal with all of these issues. There are also challenges in Beckenham and Orpington but because Bromley is the big magnet it's more fundamental to the success of the borough.

JH: There's hardly any mention throughout the entire document that Bromley is a suburb of London.

SC: We do hark to the countryside. Politically the fact that the GLA is a Labour authority and a lot of the policies they are promoting are about sustainable transport and densities jars with what makes Bromley special and attractive for people to live and work in. Part of the reason Bromley's successful, though, which is a big plus for the town centre, is the fact that it's 10 minutes from Victoria.

JH: Who were the AAP's drivers?

SC: Some of the officers at the council are property and valuation people. One of the elements of the AAP is to look at robustness of the things we are saying- they have to work. So we have consultants examining the marketplace- we'd be stupid not to. With our understanding of the marketplace, I hope we'd be looking at what's best for the town centre. I hope the AAP will broaden debate about what planning is- we have to encourage the other council departments to recognise that these are not just planning documents but for everyone. It's got to be spatial planning, because that will promote sustainability in the widest context.

JH: I see urban design as evolving to incorporate an ever larger spatial scale, to the point that soon people might talk about city-wide design. Do you agree?

SC: Yes, absolutely. I think politically what it does, as members start to read these documents, is make them aware of how important urban design is. In the very broadest sense of urban design, politicians want to understand it, because they want to understand the things they could be criticised on. But they currently see design in a separate box and as a dangerous thing, that could be used to criticise them. They also see it as expensive. I hope the AAP will go some way towards allaying those misconceptions. The document is as much about selling urban design to other parts of the council, including politicians, as it is about guiding developers.

JH: I see urban design and planning as beginning to come together....

SC: That's right. We can use urban design in Bromley to make it a place people want to come to, businesses want to invest in, so we need to understand its value.

JH: Placelessness is a description often applied to suburban centres- how do you plan to overcome this in Bromley to create a sense of local distinctiveness?

SC: The development process is confrontational. Developers will come in with their own agendas. If they are cynical and pushy they will try to do the least they can in terms of



urban design- if they have a pattern, they'll use it. The strength of the framework will be the key to enable us to be objective about the minimum requirements expected from new development- it will strengthen our hand in negotiations and help us to avoid the erosion of place. I think town centres are going to have to change quite radically, and I think Bromley has a big choice- do we actually change the character of the existing centre in order to achieve our objectives of more vitality, more mixed uses etc? We're probably going to have to if we're going to compete with Croydon, Lewisham, Bluewater and the West End. The future character of the town centre will gradually evolve during the new development, and it will be something we're going to have to guide very carefully. We're very sure what we want to do in our conservation area- it's Bromley South that will change radically. The retail area will move south and it will be kind of the 'city' end. Maybe the fabric of the old town will become even more well-defined and the other parts of the town will change more and become more dynamic. We have to have a dialogue, though, about the degree and type of change that will happen at Bromley South because of the conservatism round here.

JH: One thing I noticed about the AAP is that it is rather inward-looking, with a lot about Bromley but not much about how it connects to other centres.

SC: That's true. Because the AAP is the first plan to be developed, maybe this is why it's so inward looking. EDAW prepared it, who took it on as an urban design project in isolation. It was part of the brief. From our member's point of view, we need to start taking strategic decisions about strategy for the other centres in the Borough, so maybe Bromley in isolation is due to a lack of foresight on our part in briefing the consultants. It's interesting you say that because I don't think people here have thought it, but I see what you mean.

JH: The London Plan has been described as a Zone 1 plan- did Bromley feel left out?

SC: Most of the things that are talked about in the London Plan have implications for us, but I don't think that's why they're in there! Other good practice guides produced by the

GLA also tend to be about more historic or more urban areas. But I don't think that was a driver for the AAP. I think that politically there is an issue- we see ourselves as part of the countryside.

JH: Is the current situation vis-à-vis public consultation ideal?

SC: I'm not the right person to answer that, really. We're only halfway through the process and we'll go back again to consult people later on. But we do need to add strength to our decisions.

JH: I was surprised to see a very low priority for environmental sustainability in the AAP.

SC: Yes, I think that has to be dealt with, it's true. What implications does the AAP create for all sorts of resources?- that's not in there. It's possible that the consultants working on suburban AAPs are very well away for classic urban design theory but not so well versed in environmental sustainability. These documents have to go to a public enquiry but we have to be robust. The London Plan is strong on environmental sustainability, but for us it's how we chose to look at the sites in our own way.

JH: Is competition between centres in London in terms of design and facilities a good thing, a bad thing, or inevitable? Should there be a citywide or subregional design strategy to co-ordinate development?

SC: There's a group called Urban Design London and the southern 'banana' of that is Kingston, Richmond, Merton, Sutton, Croydon and Bromley. There's been discussions about whether those boroughs should get together and produce a design statement, particularly for residential design. I don't know how they're getting on with that logistically, though because everybody's under time pressure. In our case, we looked at the possibility of getting two or three academics together to look at a blueprint- what this document should be- but I don't think it got very far, due to an issue with funding. And

it's a big task- how do you make sure there aren't winners and losers? It's difficult to define a 'loser' because in some cases the 'loss' might relieve some unwanted pressure.

JH: There's very little about strategic design in the London Plan, isn't there?

SC: Part of the catfight will always be that if you want your town to be the biggest and best then you certainly don't want your neighbour's town to be the biggest and best and that's why you need to think about whether you should be a niche town- are there certain things about your town centre that you know you can provide and concentrate on those, e.g. specialised shops? But I think in general, suburban town centre are looking for the 'big win', so maybe that doesn't lead to comfortable liaison with your neighbours. It's all political. The Urban Design London proposal to look at residential design guidance might have the chance to counter some of those egotistical views about town centres.

JH: Is there a gap in suburban centre design theory?

SC: I think practically for Bromley we need to have statements and plans for our town centres, and we don't have those. We have a UDP, but...I'm sure they will develop in future. But yes, for me, it's looking to see whether we can create a framework for design within town centres, because they *are* different and they do have specific characters and advantages. I wouldn't have thought it was that hard to do, it's just time consuming. Bromley's got parks that need to be included within the town centre, for example- Beckenham has a pleasant high street with a river, and some history- these things need to be included as part of their offer- they are features that we can sell them on. We have got very particular activities within them, and they are very particular places. You can't have a 'one size fits all' approach.

I think pragmatically, all the [design] elements that you need for any town centre are there, but you need a context-based vision to take you there. And obviously the context is a suburban centre context. It's about engendering interest for business to make sure what you're doing is sustainable in economic terms and also getting the politicians fired up

about it too. So everything that you want to say about the centre has to be woven into a document that makes the public think that this is a place I want to be involved in and politicians to think 'this is a place I want to promote'.

### **Appendix 3: Edited Transcript of Mitcham Interview**

(Paul Garrett, Urban Designer and Brian Hodge, Regeneration Team Leader, London Borough of Merton)

JH: Was it challenging to produce such a proactive plan?

BH: Mitcham was the priority [in Merton] but we couldn't find a developer, but I went out to find one. Now we have three! We had to sell Mitcham as a concept. It was a town centre that had been declining for forty years, and no matter what the council did it got worse.

PG: The Brief puts the vision into words and pictures to promote Mitcham.

BH: It was a very structured process- reviewing the previous SPG, then commissioning the Space Syntax work, then passing it onto Paul....

JH: Who drove the Mitcham development- public or private sector?

BH: We're probably leading it as much as a Local Authority can do without any land. We only own the car park in the town centre- that's all. So it has to be developed by the market but within a planning framework. And we've strengthened that planning framework.

When we started this process, no retailer was looking for space in Mitcham. But now we have ten retailers of medium-size on the list- a lot of that is due to Asda coming in and anchoring the development, due to us selling the idea to Asda.

JH: That contrasts with Bromley's retailer-led approach....

BH: It's a different ethos. What we've tried to do is to take the community with us as far as possible. We've built a lot of community consultation in, including 30-odd meetings, and we are still updating community groups with the latest position.

PG: It's very difficult to know who's out there in terms of the community. We're constantly battling to involve as many people as possible. Given the resources we've had, we've done a fairly good job of that.

JH: To what extent was design a feature of the consultation as well as planning?

PG: The Space Syntax work and its resulting proposals did involve consultation, so design was a part of the consultation.

JH: Was there a link between the local social deprivation and the consultation?

PG: There was no consultation *method* linked to the social deprivation, but we had to overcome a cynical view of development as a result of the Council having failed these people in the past. The way that deprivation has been addressed in the brief is to help to reduce it through the mix of housing in the new development.

JH: Do you think that urban design is being applied to larger and larger spatial scales? Historically it was the site or the masterplan, now it's an entire town centre or even larger...

PG: But urban design has never been about the individual building or the street. It's been about the wider urban area. It's just that many sites that come up are not big enough to have a street through them- except possibly a cul-de-sac. For Mitcham, because it evolved organically at a crossroads, there is no network of streets- everything comes into the Green. There's only one or two minor streets in the centre we are trying to promote and even they are a problem because there is no shopping 'circuit'- everything is around the green. We are just retaining and strengthening the urban grain whilst trying to accommodate different retail units- attempting to achieve a balance.



JH: 'Placelessness' has often been used as a description of many suburban centres; while I see from the development brief that this is less of a problem in Mitcham than perhaps elsewhere, how do you intend to create a sense of place?

PG: Suburbia has not just been plonked down onto the land at some point in the past- it has spread and encompassed villages and towns with their own identities anyway, and in some cases those identities remain. In other places they don't. Mitcham is a classic example of a place that has retained distinctiveness and it's those characteristics that we want to build on.

BH: Mitcham has lost its unique selling point, though. What we don't want to create is a faceless 'clone town'- we have to find something that's unique to Mitcham, and it has an incredible history. I know a lot of people working on town centres would give their right arm for that green where it is, and the fact that you can't touch it, and you have to use that as a unique point. I think it's got some things, if we can tease them out, we can create a market there that's better than the existing one. The green is south-facing as well, so it presents opportunities for restaurants and cafes. If you can move the traffic away, you're sitting in a green suburban space, which you can't get in Bromley or Ilford. Placelessness doesn't really apply- people know they live in Mitcham and the local population are very sure about their view of Mitcham.

PG: There's local pride, and they get annoyed that Mitcham is on a slide downwards and in a poor state of repair. But they know what the positive characteristics of Mitcham are- it's a memorable place, at least in the mind rather than in reality.

JH: How does the redesign of Mitcham join up to the rest of Merton and South London, with 70% of suburban movement now orbital rather than radial?

PG: The strategy is mainly bus-based, as the Croydon tram is too far from the centre of Mitcham to play a large part in its redevelopment. The buses have an extensive network

and Mitcham is a real interchange, and the buses bring people to Mitcham to a degree for that reason, but the people see the deprivation and pass on through.

BH: Merton has a lot of town centres- Colliers Wood, Wimbledon, Morden, Mitcham, South Wimbledon, Wimbledon Village, Raynes Park - which is another difficulty as to some extent or another they are all performing town centre functions. Mitcham people go shopping in Croydon or central London.

PG: They get the tramlink to Ikea in Croydon, too. They look generally towards the Croydon area. This goes back to what Brian was saying about USPs- you can't have Mitcham trying to compete with other centres because it won't really happen- it needs its own niche. Colliers Wood will have a strength which isn't the same as Mitcham and Morden will have one totally different- so that's what we're trying to bring out- a sense of local distinctiveness. If there's nothing there, like in Morden, you might have to start that process from scratch.

JH: You have a good focus on environmental sustainability compared to Bromley and Ilford- I was surprised at their lack of concern, given the London Plan context.

PG: Part of the problem for the others is access to knowledge. We're lucky here as we've developed a 10% renewables policy for commercial developments, which was one of the first in the country. We've also got staff knowledgeable on the subject and we can tap into that subject easily.

BH: We're one of the leaders in this field, so it infuses all of our policy.

PG: The sustainability agenda is a bit like the urban design agenda was 5 or ten years ago- urban design is becoming ever more a mainstream element of planning. Environmental sustainability is moving that way, but it's not there yet. We need some sustained pressure for it to do so, for example new legislation, PPSs or whatever, to ensure it happens.

JH: Does Merton as a suburban borough feel left out by a 'Zone 1' London Plan?

BH: Not necessarily. I think the London Plan is far too interventionist across the whole of London. It does point east and centrally, though, and ignores a lot of the commercial activity in the suburbs. The suburbs are considered to be 'all housing' and there's a job to be done to persuade the mayor that there's more to London.

PG: CABE and the LDA are beginning to look at the suburbs now, though, so the focus is shifting towards suburban sustainability but also acknowledging how sustainable they already are. People are moving only short distances to work, for example I live in Raynes Park and work in Morden. The London Plan in areas, e.g. housing densities, does relate to and acknowledge suburban characteristics to some extent.

I agree with Brian that the London Plan is perhaps too interventionist. For example, if you look at how they have designated South Wimbledon/Colliers Wood as an area for intensification, not only have they got the name of the area wrong, but they've even attempted to draw the boundaries of the area. It's clear that the strategic planners don't know the area very well- they should consult with us, who have more local knowledge.

JH: What about the London Plan seeing employment only in office terms and appearing to ignore SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises)?

BH: I think 97% of our jobs are in SMEs.

PG: We took the LDA recently on a tour through some of our industrial estates and you could see that although there was indeed potential for intensification, but there were a number of high quality SMEs operating who were the sort of businesses you would want to keep- you could do so by adding stories, for example to their existing single story buildings. So intensifying, but keeping the employment as well.

JH: The context of competing suburban centres- is this healthy, or should we be trying to avoid it?

BH: You can't avoid it. It's down to individuals- it's about how the pattern of individual shopping has changed. You get stack of people saying they don't want supermarkets, but then they shop in them, which is a knock for the traditional high street. You have to look at the future trends- there is money coming out of across-the-table shopping. In Wimbledon, for example, we see £7 million being lost. It's partly being driven by the multinationals but also by shopping behaviour.

PG: AAPs can only steer trends like this, rather than forcing issues. Our context is rather different from somewhere like Bromley, as we are in more of an inner-London context.

JH: Does urban design differ in a suburban centre context, given that so much urban design seems to have emerged for inner cities (or at least uses them mainly for case studies)?

PG: I'd say that it doesn't. The principles of urban design remain the same wherever you are. You just have to relate it to context. The principles of urban design is not about the appearance of buildings- it's about activities and spaces and quality of places. You have to apply those principles to the local context to achieve the best result. So whether you are looking at Paddington Basin or a village street you're still trying to get active spaces and the same level of quality in the same way: by buildings facing the street, by people passing through giving surveillance. The type of activities that go on and the qualities of the space are different but the aims are the same. Urban design principles can help equally in both contexts.

JH: Is there a different design approach to cars in the suburban context? In Ilford, for example, Redbridge seem to think that there should be....

PG: Only in larger town centres, where pedestrianisation might involve only one street- the other streets will have to have some sort of vehicular use on them. If you look at Romford, their inner-ring road slices through residential areas and shows where transport planning completely ignores the urban design agenda. The ring road was only completed recently.

I think in urban design terms, in general in suburban areas, we have more opportunities because the pressures are less great- we can try to maintain the idea of a multipurpose street, for example. The biggest problem in terms of transport is the way it affects the layout of streets and what you do with car parking. My own personal view is that we have to have on-street parking. But transport planners don't like that, as they would rather manage parking, but they don't seem to see what an impact that has on the urban environment. But because in suburban areas the pressures are less, you probably are more able to get traditional streets with on-street parking. I can park 5 minutes from here and the people who live there drive to work, I occupy that space during the day. It's efficient use of the road space, we don't need parking courts and it provides a flow of people naturally coming and going along the street providing natural surveillance even in a residential suburban street.